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ABSTRACT

Presented in this annotated bibliography of 12 publications on students at risk are descriptions of (1) a study of 100 Austin, Texas, dropouts that identifies characteristics and conditions of high-risk students; (2) a study recommending a variety of programs to improve the progression of high-risk high school and college students; (3) a manual for recognizing potential dropouts and constructing a prevention program; (4) a pilot study in helping students correct impulsive behavior linked to delinquency; (5) findings from a national study of 30,000 high schol sophomores identifying high-risk characteristics and causal relatonships leading to dropping out; (6) a report from Kentucky that defines 32 variables for identifying high-risk high school students; (7) a manual of a Sacramento, California, high-risk behavior prevention program; (8) an analysis of educational policies arguing that many programs designed to help high-risk students lead to inequity in public education; (9) a report on characteristics of successful retention programs; (10) a report from Oregon of a two-year first-grade program aimed at preventing later grade failures; (11) a report recommending reforms in school policies as a means of preventing dropout; and (12) a research agenda of studies to be conducted by the National Center on Effective Secondary Schools on implementation strategies that are effective with at-risk students. (IW)

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THE BEST OF

ON EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT

Number 85, November 1986

The Best of ERIC presents annotations of ERIC literature on important topics in educational management.

The selections are intended to give educators easy access to the most significant and useful information available from ERIC. Because of space limitations, the items listed should be viewed as representative, rather than exhaustive, of literature meeting those criteria.

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Identifying At-Risk Students

1 **Austin Independent School District**. *"Mother Got Tired of Taking Care of My Baby." A Study of Dropouts*. Texas: Austin Independent School District, 1982. 23 pages. ED 233 102.

Too many evaluations of the dropout problem fail to consider students' viewpoints and personal decisions that lead to dropping out. This excellent report from the Austin Independent School District uses information from 100 interviews with dropouts as well as statistical data to identify characteristics and conditions of students with a high risk of dropping out.

A review of previous studies suggests that low GPA, dislike of school and teachers, low socioeconomic status, and minimal parental support are the main contributing factors to dropping out. The Austin report differs in many ways. The main reasons for dropping out, according to the dropouts themselves, are major academic failure, economic need, attraction of outside interests, health problems, and conflicts with teachers and administrators.

When studies show that many students receive one to three quarters or semesters of F's before leaving school, it is not difficult to understand why they develop a dislike of public education or decide it has nothing to contribute to their lives. All studies report that "the mass weight favoring dropping out accumulates over many years."

In Austin, 20-25 percent of the students will leave school before graduation; of these dropouts, 50 percent are unemployed. This report points to a need for a coordinated attack at every grade level to attract and keep students in school and to provide them with basic academic skills. Classes should provide engaging activities that require students to take initiative and responsibility. Vocational programs are also recommended despite the debate about the relative merits of an academic or a vocational education, because 1,000 Austin students are dropping out each year with neither.

For all students, a "modest level of academic success" is necessary, as well as the recognition of the importance of education as "preparation for the demands of adult life."

2 **Blum, Mark E., and Spangehl, Stephen D**. *Developing Educational Programs for the High-Risk Secondary School and College Student*. New York: Institute for Urban and Minority Education and ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Columbia University, July 1982. 65 pages. ED 223 762.

What are the behavioral and psychological characteristics of the high-risk student? By presenting new concepts and strong arguments against current policies, Blum and Spangehl open new doors to understanding and helping potential dropouts.

A student at risk may display deficiencies in four main areas: cognitive ability, task motivation, task performance, and locus of control and self-esteem. Direct indicators include low test scores, a minimal desire to achieve academic goals, a lack of thoroughness or logical development in one's work, and a sense of low ability or little control over success or failure. Alienation resulting from falling behind peers can lead to irresponsible behavior and the rejection of important opportunities and values. Social and economic pressures on minority and ethnic groups may also interfere with a child's self-actualization.

Some school policies "can easily convince students of their own inadequacy." The narrow curriculum of "back to basics" does not address important problem-solving, inquiry, and creative reasoning skills. Separation from the mainstream into alternative schools or vocational studies can reduce a student's opportunity for an equal education and sense of self-esteem. Blum and Spangehl recommend a variety of programs that can improve the progression of high-risk students without removing them from the normal school population.

To fulfill its role in our democratic society, the school must be a model of equal opportunity. Perhaps the most important knowledge to be learned is that of "the role of individual ability and effort in making a difference in one's own life."

3 **Cage, Bob N., and others.** *Dropout Prevention*. Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi, June 1984. 72 pages. ED 260 321.

A dropout prevention program can only be effective after the high-risk students have been identified and their problems understood. Instead of theoretical proposals, Cage presents concrete tools for recognizing potential dropouts and coherent prevention programs in this manual.

A list of sixteen characteristics of the high-risk student forms the basis for objectively judging a student's risk of dropping out of school. The Elementary School Pupil Adjustment Scale (ESPAS) can aid teachers of grades K-3 in identifying the poorly adjusted child. The Dropout Alert Scale (DAS) for grades 4-12 and Student Sensitivity Index (SSI) for grades 7-12 are questionnaires answered by the students that can help school staff recognize individual

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problems. All these instruments and guides for scoring and interpreting them are included in the manual's appendices.

Cage believes most of the school-related characteristics of the high-risk student take root in the elementary grades. In the first stages of each child's education, it is important that he or she be allowed "a reasonable degree of success"; patterns of low achievement and high absenteeism must be broken. In the secondary school, relaxed group counseling can help students communicate with school personnel, and community interaction can increase a student's career awareness.

Cage recommends programs for providing alternative educational opportunities, involving the parents with their child's education, adopting aggressive attendance policies, and developing an attendance counselor service to interact directly with the student and family.

Dropout Prevention: Staff Development Program (ED 260 322), a companion publication to this manual, serves as a guide for the training of administrators, faculty, and staff in the development of a dropout prevention program.

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4 **Campbell, Donald S., and others**. *Adolescent Impulsivity and Self-Instructional Training: A Pilot Study*. Toronto, Ontario: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1983. 79 pages. ED 240 156.

A common characteristic of high-risk and delinquent students is impulsive behavior, or the inability to "stop and think" before making decisions. Campbell and his colleagues believe early identification of impulsivity and programs to reduce its causes can significantly change a pupil's attitudes in school and for the rest of his or her life.

Cognitive impulsivity is the inability to gather and act efficiently on information when confronting problems with no clear-cut solutions. The Matching Familiar Figures test is the most common tool used to judge a student's "impulsive" responses to nonverbal problem-solving situations. According to this test and others, 30 percent of students display impulsive characteristics that can impair functional ability.

The authors review a wide body of literature linking impulsivity with delinquency and other maladaptive behavior, yet they stress that these students are neither "slow learners" nor "learning disabled." Campbell and his colleagues recommend programs designed to help students improve their causal, consequential, and means-end reasoning ability, as well as developing self-control and understanding other's perspectives.

As an example, the authors point to the results of a pilot study that involved 16 adolescent males identified as impulsive and "at risk." The students attended a class focusing on "stop and think" problem-solving strategies and videotaped feedback. Afterwards, their teachers reported a marked improvement in the students' attention and academic performance. Self-instructional sessions and videotape feedback are just some of the ways students can be helped to identify high-risk characteristics in themselves.

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5 **Ekstrom, Ruth B., and others**. "Who Drops out of High School and Why? Findings from a National Study," *Teachers College Record*, 87, 3 (Spring 1986), pp. 365-73. EJ 332 413.

Ekstrom and her colleagues present one of the best studies available on high-risk characteristics and causal relationships leading to dropping out. Their analysis draws from the High School and Beyond database, which involved a nationwide sample of 30,000 high school sophomores.

Background indicators show that a disproportionate percentage of dropouts come from low socioeconomic status families and minority racial/ethnic groups. Also, parental support is usually minimal, often involving mothers with low educational expectations of their offspring. The main reasons students themselves report for dropping out are "poor grades and not liking school." Personal conflicts, alienation, and academic failure add to the attraction of out-of-school jobs and pursuits.

By combining background and self-reported information into a path analysis, conclusions about causal relationships can be made. At the sophomore level, causal indicators of potential dropouts include poor grades, low mathematics scores, and an externalized locus of control, or "the feeling that one can do little to control one's destiny." Behavior problems are most likely to occur with students who have low verbal abilities, poor study habits, and minimal involvement in extracurricular activities.

The authors recommend programs "to help pregnant teenagers remain in school," "to help youth with economic needs combine work and education," and to help "students who perform poorly because they are dissatisfied with the school environment." To improve the home environment, policies that help parents become involved in their children's education and progress should also be developed.

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6 **Martin, Donald L., Jr.** *Identifying Potential Dropouts: A Research Report*. Frankfort: Kentucky State Department of Education, February 1981. 17 pages. ED 216 304.

The Kentucky Department of Education initiated a major study in 1979 to identify the characteristics of the high-risk student and predict who would drop out. Martin reports on the substantial database developed from this research and how it was interpreted and used.

Researchers compared 536 high school dropouts from rural and urban areas with 536 randomly selected "persisters." The results defined thirty-two variables for identifying high-risk students. Dropouts were more likely to be from broken homes, have parents with lower educational and occupational status, dislike school,

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and work more hours per week on farm and nonfarm jobs. Additional data showed that only low percentages of dropouts talked with counselors before leaving school, whereas over 50 percent discussed the decision with their parents before dropping out. This evidence underscores the importance of interacting with the family of the high-risk student.

The broad database of this study was also used to develop ninth- through twelfth-grade regression equations. By entering statistical and subjective information into computer-developed formulas, an individual's risk of dropping out could be objectively judged. Martin presents examples of how the equations were used and cross-validated.

In an introduction, Raymond Barber, Kentucky's superintendent of public instruction, emphasizes that "there is little to be gained if we merely develop our ability to identify potential dropouts." The information is only valuable when used in developing programs that can alter the attitudes and meet the needs of high-risk students.

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7 **Medcalf, Ann Wachob**. "The Communication Center Program Manual." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the California Personnel and Guidance Association, Los Angeles, February 1983. 49 pages. ED 232 114.

Instead of identifying individual groups or persons, the Joseph Kerr Junior High School in Sacramento, California, decided to prevent high-risk behavior through programs for the school as a whole. Medcalf reports on the success of the Communication Center Program in allowing students to make good decisions on their own and be responsible for their actions.

According to the theories of Rudolf Driekurs, people misbehave "to gain attention, for power, to get revenge, and to prove their worthlessness." The philosophy of the Communication Center is to provide alternatives to high-risk behavior and prevent "fighting, hazing, vandalism, theft, sexual activity resulting in V.D. or pregnancy, running away and using alcohol or other drugs." By treating problems before and as they occur, each year the center has helped more students stay in school and develop positive attitudes toward their education and themselves.

This manual is a blueprint of the development, organization, funding, and activities and services of the Communication Center.

From the beginning, the program was made cost effective though the use of trained volunteers, college interns, and community involvement. The portable building of the center provides a space for club meetings, a student store, tutoring, and referral services. Students can also "drop in" for information on drugs, V.D., and pregnancy, as well as crisis, group, peer, individual, and family counseling.

By establishing a positive rapport with the students, the Communication Center has achieved its goal of decreasing high- risk behavior and encouraging self-directed improvement and change.

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8 **Miller, Debra, and Tuley, Sandra**. *Kentucky's Children at Risk: The Inequities in Public Education*. Louisville: Kentucky Youth Advocates, Inc., June 1984. 43 pages. ED 247 351.

How can "early identification" of high-risk students lead to inequity in public education? Miller and Tuley address this question by reviewing a powerful 1984 study by the Kentucky Youth Advocates and pinpointing conditions that should be changed.

In Kentucky, the children who "fit" poorly into the public education system are identified as black, poor, handicapped, female, and those considered potential dropouts. In the push to "raise standards" and achieve "excellence" in public schools, those students for whom a quality education is most important are left behind. Through subtle and sometimes blatant policies, students are denied access to educational programs, their parents are not allowed a voice in the decision-making process of the school, and their education does not qualify them for the level of employment other students can obtain.

Miller and Tuley present well-supported arguments against many programs designed to help high-risk students. The current focus of "back to basics" may improve test scores in the short term, but competencies that lead to success in the long term are ignored. Alternative classrooms can result in watered-down curriculums, often serving the needs of the school more than those of the students. Vocational specialization can tailor an education to meet the demands of the marketplace, sometimes "tracking" large numbers of students into low pay and unskilled jobs.

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9 **O'Connor, Patrick**. *Dropout Prevention Programs That Work*. Eugene: Oregon School Study Council, OSSC Bulletin series, December 1985. 34 pages. ED number not yet assigned.

This comprehensive report lists early identification as the first of ten characteristics of successful dropout prevention programs. O'Connor also presents a profile of high-risk students and reviews three exemplary retention programs.

Low socioeconomic status, poor grades, and credit deficiencies are often considered the most common characteristics of potential dropouts, but unsatisfactory family relations, negative peer influence, and minimal participation in and identification with school can be equally important indicators. Excessive truancy is another characteristic, even though few students with high absenteeism originally intend to leave school.

O'Connor believes "early identification of potential dropouts and prompt remedial assistance are essential." Studies indicate patterns of success and failure may become ingrained in the child as early as the third grade. Early identification can be of use only if the information is properly gathered and accessible at later stages of the educational process. Many programs are now using computers to store and transfer data, as well as track attendance and credit problems.

The nine other characteristics of successful retention programs include specialized organization, student and staff selection, administrative flexibility, and unique team teaching and "buddy system" techniques. O'Connor presents examples of each characteristic in practice by reviewing the San Luis Commission in Colorado, the Opportunity Center in Eugene, Oregon, and the Hispanic Education Fund in Los Angeles.

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10 **Pheasant, Marilyn**. Aumsville School District's Readiness Program: Helping First Graders Succeed. Eugene: Oregon School Study Council, OSSC Bulletin series, February 1985. 38 pages. ED 254 937.

Success or retention in the early grades can affect the entire course of a child's education. According to the theories of Arnold Gesell, over 50 percent of later grade failures could be prevented if children were to begin school according to their developmental age instead of their chronological age. Here Pheasant reports on a successful program based on Gesell's and other developmental theories.

High-risk students were identified during the first week of school by a variety of screening tests. Those selected would attend a "readiness" first grade, and then next year attend the standard first grade. Pheasant notes how difficult it was for some parents to understand why their child would need a two-year program, but a careful explanation of the benefits overcame their fears.

An experienced, full-time teacher was hired for the "readiness room," and a curriculum was developed on first-grade textbooks. Important activities to help develop motor skills, social skills, and a positive self-concept were also part of the program.

Results after two years show the "readiness first grade" to be a great success. Upon entering the standard first grade, the formerly high-risk students can be "room leaders instead of followers" and above average achievers. Their positive attitudes appear to continue through later grades as well.

11 **Wehlage, Gary G., and Rutter, Robert A**. "Dropping Out: How Much Do Schools Contribute to the Problem?" *Teachers College Record*, 87, 3 (Spring 1986), pp. 374-92. EJ 332 414.

Many statistical and subjective high-risk characteristics can be defined, yet it is still unclear whether negative school attitudes, poor self-esteem, and low educational aspirations are "brought to the school or produced by school experiences." Wehlage and Rutter review the nationwide High School and Beyond (HS&B) data set to identify school policies that produce student dissatisfaction and suggest ways in which conditions may be improved.

According to self-reported reasons for leaving school in the HS&B research, a majority of dropouts feel teachers are not interested in students and school discipline is unfair and ineffective. For many high-risk students, "school is a place where one gets into trouble." Failing courses results in credit deficiencies until graduation seems an impossible goal. Upon leaving school, many dropouts experience an overall gain in self- esteem to the point of being equal with "the group with greatest self-esteem, the college-bound."

Wehlage and Rutter propose three reforms of policy: emphasizing the professional accountability of educators toward all students, renewing efforts to make authority in schools legitimate, and redefining school work to "allow a greater number of students to achieve success and satisfaction and to continue their schooling." Changes would include improving teacher- student interaction, redefining disciplinary practices (especially to curb truancy), and using nontraditional forms of learning. As an example, vocational programs could be expanded by a "voucher plan" to allow credited educational experiences to take place in community-based programs.

12 **Wehlage, Gary G., and Smith, Gregory A**. *Programs for At-Risk Students: A Research Agenda*. Madison: National Center on Effective Secondary Schools, University of Wisconsin, September 1986. 31 pages. ED number not yet assigned.

In addressing the problem of at-risk students, educators have employed three main strategies: early identification and intervention in elementary school, special programs and alternative opportunities in high school, and systemic or schoolwide changes to enhance the retention power of junior and senior highs (for example, attendance monitoring techniques, counseling, and academic remediation). Wehlage and Smith review the strengths and limitations of each strategy.

Is early identification and intervention in the first years of school the best way to prevent youth from dropping out of high school? Not necessarily, say Wehlage and Smith, for several reasons. First, in many schools sorting at-risk students from those that are not is difficult. Also, negative labeling of students may occur as a result of identification errors. Third, effective practices that seek to ensure students' academic achievement in the elementary grades should already be in place. Finally, and most important, there is no evidence to suggest that the need for special programs at the high school level will be reduced.

This last point is based on the fact that many causes of dropping out do not come from academic deficiencies, but result from other factors such as pregnancy, drug abuse, breakup of the family, and psychological problems. Further, successful early identification of at-risk students is likely to require continuation of special programs in high school.

In an effort to identify effective programs for secondary students, ten sites were selected that serve a range of at-risk students. These programs will be studied by the National Center on Effective Secondary Schools for one to two years using both pre- and post-testing of several variables along with systematic observations and interviews. The intent is to produce knowledge useful to practitioners regarding implementation of strategies that are effective with at-risk students.

A complete collection of ERIC materials on **Dropout Prevention** is available from the ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management in the Value Search series.

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